

BYRON'S "PRISONER OF CHILLON."

IT is often said that Byron's genius was emphatically non-dramatic; that he could depict only himself in his varying phases and poses, and was entirely unable to throw himself into other characters. But, while it must be granted that the "subjective" element strongly predominates in him, the sweeping judgment that pronounces him "self-bounded" must be condemned and reversed on the evidence of this poem. For we have here a character, widely different from the poet's own, portrayed "from the inside." The poem belongs indeed, by its general plan, to the great class of epics or tales, yet is dramatic, by reason of the poet's complete concealment of himself behind the hero; and lyric, because that hero is subjectively, not objectively, considered, *i.e.*, because we look not *at* him as revealed by his actions, but across his personality and through his consciousness at that which occupies his thoughts, arouses his emotions and calls his will into activity.

In order to appreciate the completeness of our Poet's self-effacement, let us look into his circumstances at the time when this poem was written, *i.e.*, during his stay at Geneva in 1816. He has left us in the "Farewell," the "Sketch," and the "Lines on hearing that Lady Byron was sick," three dark pictures of his inner life; pictures that seem true in spirit, though perhaps the colours are unduly heightened—true in kind though not in measure; pictures that awaken in us deep shuddering pity, tinged, alas! with a shade of contempt for him who could calmly acquiesce in that murder of his nobler self of which he accuses his wife:—

"The moral Clytemnestra of (her) Lord,
(Who) hew'd down, with an unsuspected sword,
Fame, peace and hope—and all the better life
Which, but for this cold treason of (her) heart,
Might still have risen from out the grave of strife."

In 1816 Byron found himself practically exiled from his detested native land by public opinion, and was slowly realising that for him all hope of domestic happiness was at an end, a certainty which turned all that tender feeling which might have borne fruits of repentance into bitter resentment and angry despair.

So much for his circumstances at this particular time. Now let us think of his general life and character, of his ideas and ideals. His most prominent trait was the desire for esteem, over-developed and distorted (by the treatment which he had received from his boyhood at the hands of his mother, his teachers, his companions, and from the world) into a rabid thirst for public notice, insomuch that he preferred rather to be infamous than to pass unmarked. The expedient to which he resorted to make himself interesting was this: he donned a striking mask,—all the more striking from its contrast to his youth and rank—that of a gloomy misanthrope, sinning much and horribly, but always attractively and picturesquely; he adopted a strange pose, of a martyr for Liberty (or to licence?) suffering much and unjustly, but always gracefully and harmoniously. Truly it is on all counts hard to believe that this exquisite little poem can have been written by such a man at such a moment of his life; that he could refrain so long from his cynical sneer; could lay down his rôle of iconoclast; could turn his thoughts away from his own wrongs and griefs; could so restrain the impetuosity of his feelings as to treat even this theme—the suffering of a noble nature through the tyrannous hate of his fellowmen, who have pent him and his "like brutes within an iron den"—with a moderation and a self-control that gives to its calm recital the sublime force of such stories as Silvio Pellico's. For here, the poet who too often sings of a "heroism" that is but reckless licentious revolt against all law, both human and divine, rises high above the plane of his usual thought and conceives the noblest ideal of true heroism; sees martyrdom for once as the seed of progress and of victory, the crown of man's nobility, and the proof of his inward freedom; looks for once away from the persecutors (the thought of whom always fills his mind and his pen with fiery torrents of righteous wrath) to the sufferer, for whom their wickedness or ignorance has prepared a steep and thorny path of voluntary sacrifice.

"Eternal Spirit of the Chainless Mind!
Brightest in dungeons, Liberty, thou art;
For there thy habitation is the heart—
The heart which love of thee alone can bind.
And when thy sons to fetters are consign'd—
To fetters, and the damp vault's dayless gloom,
Their country conquers with their martyrdom
And Freedom's fame finds wings on every wind."

The ideal of heroism is represented concretely, as it were, in the Prisoner, a simple, patient, constant man, who, having seen the path of duty and "in hours of insight" willed to tread it, fulfils his purpose through "hours of gloom"; who, having counted the cost of faithfulness to truth and rejected all thought of shameful compromise, does not shrink from the heavy payment he must give, but coins his heart's blood willingly and sacrifices himself anew each day to redeem the pledge given so long ago.

It is to be remarked that the only words in the whole poem that refer to the cruelty of the persecution are rung from the Prisoner by the thought of his fellow-sufferers, his brothers; while the fact that each single pang of misery, each single day and hour, was truly a free-will offering is shown by these lines:

———"I could not die;
I had no earthly hope—but faith,
And that forbade a selfish death."

The sublimity of that long martyrdom in which Liberty—dearer than Life itself—is freely sacrificed at the altar of truth is, then, the main idea of the poem. But it is also an object-lesson on the unutterable cruelty of imprisonment, showing clearly and pathetically the evils that it works on man's manifold nature. For though, through God's merciful over-ruling, the soul may be refined by it, yet it will be at cost of horrible, unnecessary pain and loss to body and mind, the harmony of a man's life being turned to discord and his nature strangely distorted and deformed in many members, so that, his hand and eye and foot being cut off, though they did not "offend him," he leaves this world unnecessarily maimed and blind and halt.

These two ideas are in the poem like two waves that break successively on the same beach, each complete with curve and crest, yet still not separate from the other, since in their different entities they both contain the self-same drops of water. Thus the first idea attains its climax (in IX.) when, at the death of his beloved brother, the martyr-soul reaches the highest pitch of agony. Then comes that wave's ebb, which is at the same time the gathering-together of the waters for the second billow, destined to break higher still on the mournful shore. For the gradual mitigation of the Prisoner's extremest anguish marks the successive steps by

which the dungeon-blight withers his vitality, till at last the second more awful tragedy is complete:

"It was at length the same to me
Fettered or fetterless to be:
I learned to love despair"—
"My very chains and I grew friends"—
———"I
Regain'd my freedom with a sigh."

Considered artistically, I think this poem ranks among Byron's best works,—in fact, I should place it higher than any other, except some of his lyrics. The simple metre and non-sonorous rhyme which elsewhere are noticeable as Byron's peculiar weakness, marring much of his best work, are here, on the contrary, most suitable, most perfectly in harmony with the whole conception and treatment of the theme. The proportions of the poem are admirably balanced; for once, the poet's passion has not been allowed to spoil the symmetry of his work. Like a pre-Raphaelite picture, the poem is full of detail, and yet its simplicity is in no wise marred, because each detail is significant, and, at the same time, is subordinate to the general plan of the picture,—is "inevitable," in fact; is a line or point whose absence would rob the whole composition of its perfection.

Again, to follow our metaphor still farther, the colour scheme is perfectly harmonious; the dungeon gloom has tinged the Prisoner's thoughts and words with cold, pale, neutral tints in middle tones, without contrast of high light and deep shade. But this grim monotone is relieved by two gleams of brightness from a sunlit world, the gorgeousness of the bird and the brilliant beauty of mountain, lake, and island, shining rainbow-like upon the prison cloud.

Thus we may surely pronounce this poem a masterpiece by virtue of the noble ideas which it expresses and of the beauty and fitness with which they are uttered.

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